

A CAREER THAT WASN'T

Ruth B. Bottigheimer*

RESUMEN

Se trata de un testimonio sobre el modo en que esta académica ingresó al mundo de la literatura infantil y juvenil en la década de 1960. Reflexiona sobre las oportunidades casi nulas para las mujeres de ese entonces de ingresar a la academia, pese a su preparación, y demuestra el modo en que fue abriéndose paso dentro de un universo nuevo para ella y las aportaciones que hizo a la LIJ.

ABSTRACT

A testimony of a scholar who entered the world of children's literature in the 1960's. She talks about the limited opportunities for women in those days to enter academia, despite having earned advanced degrees. She describes the paths she followed to reach a new world as well as the contributions she made in the field.

PALABRAS CLAVE


Carreras de las mujeres en la LIJ (1960), libros de ciencia para niños, Biblias para niños, cuentos folclóricos, análisis de los cuentos de los hermanos Grimm (diferencias de género).

KEY WORDS

1960's women careers in children's literature, children's science books, Bibles for children, folktales, Grimm's tales analysis (gender differences).

*Académica en el Departamento de Lingüística de la Universidad de Stony Brook en Nueva York.

MY PROFESSIONAL CAREER STARTED WITH A STOP. LET ME GO BACK TO PROVIDE AN EXPLANATION

n 1964 we moved to from Berkeley California to Stony Brook, where the newly founded university's history department offered a job to my husband and their German Department held out an expectation of a job for me. With a year's university study in Munich, another in London, and with a B.A. and an M.A. in German in hand, I was ready to teach and eagerly responded to the German Department's interest in taking me on. However, Stony Brook was part of the New York State educational system, and its hiring rules were still guided by the 1930s nepotism regulations that were meant to divide state resources among as many families as possible during the Depression. No job teaching German for me, not at Stony Brook, and with a two-month-old baby, I was reluctant to look for a position that would require little Nat's spending long hours with a baby sitter.

FROM ARTS TO SCIENCE

A difficult adjustment followed, from which I emerged, knowing that sideways, not forward, was the new direction. In this case, "sideways" took me to the office of Stony Brook's vice president Bentley Glass, who headed the *Quarterly Review of Biology*, whose editorial board had come up with the distinctly quirky idea of reviewing children's science books. Several years' poring over science books written for children introduced me to worlds I had never known, and to this day what I know about epidemiology, poisons, and tectonic plates results from that unintended exposure.

In the 1960s, I was only one among thousands of women ready to go, but with no professional destination realistically -possible. For all practical purposes, the faculty was an overwhelmingly male preserve, witness the longterm existence of the "Faculty Wives Club." Some of us wives with degrees in literatures, languages, the arts, and even in the sciences, thought about the remarkable Long Island environment in which we were living. Its distinct ecological niches and microclimates –salt water,

dry beaches, salt and fresh water marshes, pine barrens, deciduous woods— became classrooms for our children, as we began to teach them about where they lived. After organization and fundraising, the classes turned into an environmental center with weekend and summer classes for children. So effective was the concept, that schools soon became clients and forty years later it still exists, as does its then sister organization, the Environmental Defense Fund, whose first offices were upstairs over the Stony Brook Post Office, but which is now a national organization centered in Colorado.

THE GRIMMS' TALES

Where is children's literature in all of this? It's there and it's not there. With two small children, I had plenty of experience reading to children. I'd also worked hard at getting them to write, which started when they could first talk and which continued for years. Their earliest "writing," for the record, consisted of their making up and telling me a story that I typed. My own children delighted in producing "books" in this way, and so I took my typewriter into their school classrooms, and did the same with other children. They liked the process and so did the teachers.

It wasn't until 1978 that I got academic again, entering a university program in German that didn't yet officially exist, a doctoral program in language teaching. In a seminar on German Romanticism, my professor suggested that I research the subject of women in the Grimm tales. The subject seemed straightforward enough, but as I repeatedly read through the collection's 210 tales, I found surprising disjunctions between what the secondary literature—almost all written by men— said about those tales and what I was reading in the tales themselves. I handed in the paper, published it soon after, and kept on going.

SOCIAL VISION AND MORAL VALUES IN THE GRIMMS' TALES AND FEMINISM AS A WHOLE

I found the social and moral vision in the Grimms' tales abhorrent. Worse than that, what passed for objective analysis in the secondary literature was often little more than a reification of male experience, assumptions, and preferences. To be sure, the secondary literature was also pre-1980s, which means that none of it had yet been subjected to existential queries about self and other or to feminist skepticism about points of view.

The date was the 1980s, a period in which women were beginning to enter academia in meaningful numbers, but also a date at which higher education in the sciences and the arts was still a distinctly male preserve. Seminal works that showed the effect of gender on research results was taking shape, making waves, and being dismissed by traditional male scholars on the grounds that scholarship is a gender neutral pursuit of truth. The same research results were embraced by feminists because they resonated deeply with their experience of the world. And yet it was not a feminist, but an exclusively intellectual curiosity that led me from the Grimms' tales into a study of a novel branch of children's literature. In the final chapter of *Grimm's Bad Girls and Bold Boys* I had searched for an underlying principle that could unify the disparate strands of my findings in the Grimm tales about gender differences in speech use, transgressing prohibitions, Christianity, images of water and fire, and isolation. The recurring motif was punishing an unforgiven Eve.

SOCIALIZATION THROUGH RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES

That might have remained a curious and isolated academic finding, except that the curator of a small and seldom-visited German museum was so delighted at having someone to talk to one day that he opened one case after the other and put into my hands things like a pair of Jacob Grimm's gloves, and then, *mirabile dictu!* the Grimms' 1785 children's Bible given to them by their grandfather, a Calvinist minister. I checked out Genesis, expecting to find an unforgiven Eve, but a very different Eve inhabited those pages—a woman pursuing the

knowledge promised to her by a duplicitous satan, an Eve who wished to share the possibility of new-found knowledge with her husband

That children's Bible Genesis narrative was such a surprise, that I began reading other children's Bibles. The study began with 18th-century German Eve stories, but it soon expanded into a corpus of 21 stories that had troubled parents, teachers, and preachers for centuries, whether they were Jewish, Catholic, or Protestant. The ways these 21 stories were told varied more with social class than with religious affiliation.

OUTRAGE!!

Eventually I read over 2,000 children's Bibles published between 1170 and 1993. The commentary built into the tales was engaging, and the theological commentary and the sermons from which the children's Bible authors took their cue was almost more than I could bear. I had to work really hard to control the language in which I wrote that book, and it was enormously gratifying that the Children's Literature Association gave it a prize, which I treasure.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND THE HISTORY OF CHILDHOOD

Each of the children's Bibles published before about 1850 had a specific audience in mind, whose identity emerged from the titles, the prefaces, and the contents themselves. Understanding the relationship between the explicit and implicit messages of all those little children's Bibles and the daily reality of all those intended readers meant learning something about the daily realities of German orphans, Swiss farmers' children, "gently bred" merchants' children, children with tutors and governesses, and children of factory workers. Their lives were the unarticulated stuff of all those children's Bibles, and I believe, of all children's literature.

In very particular ways, children's literature and the history of childhood permeates my life. In the spring of 2009 the *New York Times* ran a lengthy article on my garden, and in the course

of the interview I talked about the garden's design. It had mainly been a backyard for baseball games until our children were teenagers. At that point, their interest shifted to girls and boys respectively, and I began to entertain thoughts of grandchildren. Grandchildren meant visits to grandmother's house, and I wanted them to be happy visits. I hoped to watch children playing hide and seek, and for that they'd need paths and hidey holes.

CONCEPTION OF CHILDHOOD

I also had clear thoughts about childhood as a time in which children's being bored means that they have find things to do on their own, to develop indwelling resources, and *that* is something that is done in secret places, or rather, in places you can see out of, but other people can't see into, places from which you can move into other worlds. For me as a child in the small isolated town of Salem in southern New Jersey, there had been two such places: one had been the public library with its stuffed penguin and three bookcases of children's books and the other had been the swamps and marshes that began at the end of nearly every street in town. But 1940s Salem and 1990s Stony Brook were vastly different from one another, and so the hidden places would have to be a clever conceit, built into the house and the garden.

For me the study of children and children's literature rests on a broad foundation comprising two questions: What is the point of children's literature? What is the process of childhood? Those two questions inhere in the study of children's literature for many of us, although we don't always articulate them in those terms.

If, when we had arrived in Stony Brook, there had been no nepotism regulations, I would have gone into the German Department as a faculty member, and I might not have become enthralled by children's literature. But then again, I read the Grimms' tales as a Germanist in the early 1980s, and I probably would have found an unforgiven Eve and would have taken the next step into children's Bibles to try to understand that, and I'd still be thinking about a career that sometimes appears inadvertent but more often seems inevitable.

TEACHING AND PUBLISHING

What I've written until now is personal and also individual. I've said little about the family, my husband Karl, our son Nat and our daughter Hannah, within and around whose lives I devised a life in children's literature. After I completed a doctorate in applied linguistics, which is to say, language teaching, Princeton University hired me to teach German. And so the long deferred teaching career began. At Princeton, I got serious about fairy tales and wrote *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys* (1987) and then *The Bible for Children from the Age of Gutenberg to the Present* (1996), both of which Yale University Press published. Fellowships at Cambridge University's Clare Hall, at Göttingen in Germany, and later at Magdalen College Oxford helped my research, and along the way I taught in the departments of theology or folklore at the Universities of Vienna, Innsbruck, and Siegen, and at summer children's literature institutes at Hollins University and Roehampton College in London.

Conferences kept me abreast of academic debates, and in one case precipitated an ongoing controversy. Continuing to work with fairy tales, and moving backward from the Grimms to Giovan Francesco Straparola (c 1485-c1557), I found that the first of the rags to riches fairy tales, which I call rise fairy tales, appeared under his name in 1550s Venice. And so, in *Fairy Godfather: Straparola, Venice, and the Fairy Tale Tradition* (2002), I posited him as a game-changing fairy-tale author. The claim of authorship (as opposed to oral transmission) aroused considerable hostility at the 2005 International Society for Folk Narrative Research conference in Tartu Estonia, which resulted in the Fall 2010 issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* being devoted to a critique of my theories together with a defense from me. With my little book, *Fairy Tales. A New History* (2009), the heated debate continues.

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC

The years from 1981, when I began teaching at Princeton, to now are ones in which the number of jobs in children's literature has increased and in which the profile of children's literature has risen above the horizon within academia as a whole. And yet, I came into the field sideways and was never a candidate for a position in children's literature. My work has, thus, never produced a salary that even remotely approached the level of making me self-supporting. But the late 20th century was a period in which a single academic salary for a person who'd begun an academic career in the United States in the 1960s (as my husband did) could support a family. That economic fact together with an interested and supportive husband enabled me to continue research and writing

I think about retiring from the intellectual fray, but I just can't resist looking into tantalizing issues. I've nearly finished a book on magic tales from ancient Egypt to Renaissance Italy, and I may keep snooping into evidence of European elements in the *Arabian Nights*. That, it turns out, is a controversial question.